



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time | Year B



James Tissot, circa 1886-1894:
He Went Through the Villages on the Way to Jerusalem



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

(Found in your parish Sacramentary.)

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

To The Heart of Jesus

(By Blessed Miguel Pro, S.J.)

Does our life become from day to day more painful,
more oppressive, more replete with sufferings?

Blessed be He a thousand times who desires it so.

If life be harder, love makes it also stronger,
and only this love, grounded on suffering,
can carry the Cross of my Lord, Jesus Christ.

I believe, O Lord, but strengthen my faith,

Heart of Jesus, I love you, but increase my love.

Heart of Jesus, I trust in you,
but give greater vigor to my confidence.

Heart of Jesus, I give my heart to you,
but so enclose it in you that it may never be
separated from you.

Heart of Jesus, I am all yours,
but take care of my promise
so that I may be able to put it in practice
even unto the complete sacrifice of my life.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Sharing Faith

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today's liturgy continues the slow movement toward the fulfillment of Jesus' ministry that we will proclaim and manifest in the weeks ahead as the liturgical year winds down.
- ▶ Today's liturgy is an exhortation for us to be surprised about who God invites into his kingdom.
- ▶ It is also an invitation to be open to the Spirit's work—the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills and invites whom the Spirit wills to invite.
- ▶ It is an invitation to see God's work even among non-believers.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

First Reading: Numbers 11: 25-29

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ **Moses appoints seventy elders. Two elders were not present for the commissioning ceremony and thus were not anointed as were the other elders. God gifted them at a later time and allowed them to minister in spite of their lack of legitimacy.**
- ▶ Moses and the people journeyed as nomads through the desert. They periodically pitched tents and erected a *meeting tent* away from the village tents.
- ▶ God would appear to Moses in a cloud at the entrance of the *meeting tent* where he presented Moses with directions for leading the people.
- ▶ God told Moses to commission seventy elders to help him guide and lead the people of Israel.
- ▶ Moses celebrated a commissioning rite with the elders in which Moses called upon God's Spirit to rest upon the elders.
- ▶ The gathered elders were gifted with the gift of prophecy.
- ▶ Two elders were missing yet were later given the same gift.
- ▶ Medad and Eldad were not authorized members of the elders yet they still exercised the ministry they had no legitimacy to exercise.
- ▶ Joshua strongly advised Moses to make them cease and desist fearing that if he demonstrated deference toward them Moses would lose respect and his authority would be diminished.

- ▶ An eternal spiritual truth is realized in this event. The Spirit cannot be contained or controlled but moves where the Spirit wills. The Spirit's action is a type or a foreshadowing of the Spirit who would come and anoint all God's people to prophesy in God's name—fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.
- ▶ God is in control of the religious offices created by human beings; such offices are under God's authority and by extension God's will.
- ▶ God works for the good of the community, not an exalted group or individual within that community.
- ▶ Everyone is exalted and no one is diminished when God's gifts are distributed to the entire community.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ What is there about this reading that captures your imagination?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about his relationship with us?
- ▶ Have you ever known a situation in which someone was doing something good or beneficial without the requisite authority to do so and was criticized for doing so? What does this reading teach us about that situation?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about God's Spirit?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about human authority and human offices?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about our/my relationship with God?
- ▶ In what way are you able to relate this reading to your own life experience?

Second Reading: James 5: 1-6

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ **James presents his catechism on social justice.**
- ▶ Today's reading is the fifth in a five-week series in which we will hear passages from the Letter of James in the liturgy.
- ▶ A reminder: as stated last week this letter is known as one of the seven general epistles or "Catholic" letters; they are not written to a specific community. It is a moral exhortation reminiscent of the wisdom books of the Old Testament. There are also echoes of Greek Stoicism, a baptismal liturgy and profession of Christian faith.

- ▶ The above influences notwithstanding, the letter is definitively Jewish in origin and was written for Jewish Christians.
- ▶ While debate abounds, it is widely believed that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. There is also a possibility that James was a pseudonym, or a ghost-writer and interpreter of James.
- ▶ The focus of today's second reading is social justice.
- ▶ James, in today's pericope (segment), focuses his attention on the issue of social justice.
- ▶ James insists that God cares for the troubles of the poor and oppressed.
- ▶ When he insists that the cries of the lowly extend to the "Lord of Hosts," James is echoing an Old Testament reference to God of the Covenant (the "Lord of Hosts) who promised to care for the poor and oppressed.
- ▶ Early Christians believed that Jesus would return soon. James was preparing them for his return. James insisted they focus their life in Christ rather than be distracted by earthly wealth.
- ▶ Following the tradition of the prophets and God himself, James upholds the rights and concerns of the poor among them. Insisting that such care is constitutive of the Gospel (as our social teaching affirms) James also challenged the rich.
- ▶ James proclaims justice to audiences ancient and contemporary. His word reaches all the way to the hallowed halls of the twenty-first century and is as convicting today as it was then.
- ▶ Attachment to riches is an obstacle to following the Christian Way—both here and now and in the future—the kingdom of God now and not yet.
- ▶ James speaks a word to wealthy people who are more concerned with amassing their fortunes than worrying about their life in Christ and their responsibility to God's people in the world.
- ▶ One inherent risk of wealth is to pay little attention to the needs of other people.
- ▶ Wealth is not evil unto itself. It becomes evil when access to it is limited and only a small number of people are able to enjoy the benefits of that wealth.
- ▶ When wealth is not used to care for starving people then it is evil.
- ▶ James criticizes the farmer who refused to pay a just wage and reminded him that another Harvester would come and he would garner all the payments due him in full.
- ▶ All will be judged by the way in which they care (or not) for the poor and oppressed in our world.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What is your attitude toward poor people?
- ▶ What is James telling us our attitude toward the poor people should be?
- ▶ What are the consequences if we fail to care for poor people?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that social justice is constitutive of the Gospel?
- ▶ Do you possess any attitudes toward poor and marginalized people in need of conversion?
- ▶ In what way, if any, can you relate to the teaching in this reading?

Gospel: Mark 9; 38-43, 45, 47-48

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

For those catechists who prefer an abbreviated interpretation of the Gospel refer to the bulleted points that follow and then choose questions for your reflection found at the end of the entire exegesis. (Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

Abbreviated treatment of the Gospel:

- ▶ People in antiquity believed in the presence of spirits who created chaos in their lives.
- ▶ A non-believer cast out a demon by the power of Jesus' name.
- ▶ John was incredulous as well as intolerant.
- ▶ Even though the exorcist was not a disciple of Jesus' he nevertheless recognized his power and called upon it to deliver the person from the demon.
- ▶ Jesus insisted that the man was not against him—he was for him. The fruit of his action was enough evidence.
- ▶ The man performed a great work by the power of Jesus' name even though he was not a member of the Christian community.
- ▶ Jesus' meaning is clear—when a person accomplishes a great deed using the power of Jesus' name they are already for him and not against him.

- ▶ In other words, a person is a member of Jesus' community unless he or she intentionally chooses to separate and leave.
- ▶ John tried to erect obstacles to inclusion by his actions.
- ▶ Jesus acted decisively to quash John's attempt to cavalierly assert power and authority where he had no right to do so.
- ▶ John and his brother James displayed similar intolerance when they suggested that God should rain down fire on the Samaritans in Luke's Gospel.
- ▶ John understood exorcism to be the privileged purview of those in authority in their perceived hierarchy of Christian leadership.
- ▶ Once again the issue of who is least and who is greatest rears its ugly head.
- ▶ Jesus came down quickly and decisively upon John.
- ▶ The scenario is dripping in irony since John himself was unable to perform an exorcism in verses 14-29.
- ▶ The disciple's lack of tolerance was a direct assault on Jesus' command to welcome and receive (v. 37).
- ▶ Jesus continues to drive home his message of inclusivity—all are welcome. No one is excluded.
- ▶ Their childish bantering made it clear they felt that *they alone* were given the ability to call upon Jesus' power and authority by virtue of their privileged association with him.
- ▶ The disciples' primary complaint was that the exorcist was not one of them. In other words, he was not a follower. The disciples cared more about having people follow them than they did about following Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus used the situation to teach the disciples a much-needed lesson.
- ▶ First, anyone who used the power of Jesus' name to perform a mighty work cannot at the same time speak ill of him.
- ▶ Second, whoever is not against him as he stated in the Gospel is for him; it is an obvious truth. That truth only makes the betrayal of Peter and the other disciples all the more bitter. **They were the ones in the end who were against him.**
- ▶ Mark loved to use irony to narrate the Christ event—and this scene is, as stated earlier, dripping with it.
- ▶ Third, the most important reason, judging by the *Amen* saying attached to it and the use of the word *Messiah*, is that Jesus was ready and willing to embrace the hospitality of others—even strangers—and that the most basic gestures of compassion and generosity would have redemptive implications.
- ▶ John is interested in maintaining power and the status quo.
- ▶ Jesus, on the other hand, cared only about his appointed mission to establish a reign of peace, love, forgiveness and compassion.
- ▶ Jesus extended an invitation of welcome to anyone who heralds God's benevolence, righteousness and justice.
- ▶ Piggy-backing on the theme from last week's Gospel, Jesus continued to insist that there is no room for self-righteous, self-aggrandizing attitudes in the ministry to God's kingdom.
- ▶ John's thirst for power and the structures that go with that power have no place in Christian consciousness—yet even today it is alive and well. Such is the nature

of power structures.

- ▶ Official disciples are not the only people capable of spreading the Good News and acting in the power of Jesus' name by healing and freeing people from the power of darkness.
- ▶ In other words, regardless of where the source of compassion and mercy and healing redemption comes from, Christians are to support those efforts as coming from Christ himself.
- ▶ The wonderful news of this Gospel is that anyone who offers mercy and compassion to a Christian will be rewarded for their efforts.

This brings the abbreviated interpretation to a close. Refer to the questions at the end of the entire exegesis and choose the appropriate questions for your reflection.

FURTHER ELABORATION OF THE GOSPEL

The following exegesis is provided for your further and continued reflection.

- ▶ In addition to the above material there are several other interesting elements in this Gospel for our reflection.
- ▶ Theologian Karl Rahner spoke of the phenomenon of “anonymous Christian.” According to Rahner an anonymous Christian was a person who lived a righteous life—that person’s life would be judged by the way in which that person lived an upright, moral life.
- ▶ The axiom, “actions speak louder than words,” aptly describes Jesus’ message in today’s Gospel. Righteous practice not one’s title, or authority or name will be the means by which righteous life in the kingdom will be judged.
- ▶ Kind, generous, loving, compassionate actions extended toward Christ and his mission will be acknowledged.
- ▶ God will reward such people with his completely gratuitous gift of grace.
- ▶ Lest we do not get it either, Jesus is clear: no one is to create false boundaries and barriers to inclusion in the Christian community.
- ▶ “One sure fire way to subvert the lust to control a group is to make sure the definition of *belonging* is inclusive and adaptable. Jesus cements his argument by showing the disciples how just as an *outsider* might generate life and healing, an *insider* is capable of serious betrayal”¹.
- ▶ As was his custom, Jesus railed against the ritual purity laws of the day when he cautioned and warned anyone who caused a little one to stumble.
- ▶ Jesus admonished that such a person would be better off if his or her hand was cut off and thrown in the fire. While such a thought turns our stomach (as it did theirs) the worst effect of that would have been the ultimate outcome of being rendered unclean and thus cut off from the life of the community. People with disabilities and with a body that was not whole were considered unclean and thus ritually impure.
- ▶ Jesus is presenting a huge theological reversal—righteous action is more than

¹ Birmingham, Mary. Word and Worship Workbook, Year B, Mahwah: Paulist Press, Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

bodily wholeness---it is another assault on the ritual purity laws.

- ▶ The only criterion for access to God is what lies deep within a person's heart.
- ▶ Jesus casts his dire warning: it is better for the transgressor of these actions to die than to cause one of Jesus' little ones to stumble.
- ▶ We hear this admonishment again when Judas betrayed Jesus.
- ▶ There is another interpretation posited for the segment regarding the hand, foot and eye.
- ▶ Jewish understanding of those body parts affirms that they (eye, hand, foot, etc.) are the locus (source) of any given unrighteous action. In other words, those body parts are the parts used to commit sin or to tempt others to sin.
- ▶ Perhaps there is an alternate interpretation. First century Palestinian courts meted out justice by cutting off the offending body part used in the commission of a crime. (Similar punishment still takes place in some Muslim cultures today.) For example the hand was amputated in the case of robbery, the eye for cases of adultery, sexual misconduct and rape, etc.
- ▶ Paradoxically, this form of punishment was considered a humane alternative to the death penalty.
- ▶ Perhaps Mark was thinking of this latter principle and thus suggesting that the community be lenient in dealing with wayward members.
- ▶ Mark could have been making a statement against the form of retribution/justice in which death was the expected punishment for dealing with informants and backsliders who put the safety of the community at risk.
- ▶ People who posed a danger to the moral and safe well being of the community could be expelled but always with the hope of reconciliation and reinstatement back into the life of community.
- ▶ This interpretation makes sense in light of verse 49 that insists that the community must be seasoned with salt and fire—an allusion to the protocol for sealing and healing a wound after amputation.
- ▶ A primary theme for Mark is the way of nonviolence. The kingdom will be established in peace, love, reconciliation, and compassion—not in violent overthrow, or power plays or yielding to violent retributive systems of justice.
- ▶ Mark's Jesus demands that exclusionary walls be torn down and that all would be welcomed in the reign he came to establish.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to ONE or MORE appropriate questions (as time allows) in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface their insights in the wider group. Catechist responds by sharing his or her own experience. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the Good News in the Gospel?
- ▶ What is the lesson in this Gospel?

- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ John's thirst for power and the structures that go with that power have no place in Christian consciousness—yet even today it is alive and well. Such is the nature of power structures. What do those statements mean to you? Where do we see thirst for power and control and seats of self-aggrandizement today? What does Jesus have to teach us about it even today?
- ▶ How tuned in are you/we to the righteous actions of people in the secular world and see those actions as the hand of God working in and through such people? Do you have more of a tendency to see God working only within the confines of Church structures or do you see God working even through the non-believer? What does this situation teach us about God's relationship with all human beings in the world?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel when it comes to non-believers and people from other faiths? What is Jesus telling us?
- ▶ Consider the statement: "Theologian Karl Rahner spoke of the phenomenon of "anonymous Christian." According to Rahner an anonymous Christian was a person who lived a righteous life—that person's life would be judged by the way in which that person lived an upright, moral life." How do you feel about his assertion and what does it teach us about God's relationship with us?
- ▶ Once again Jesus insists that all are welcome in the community. What are some ways that our communities truly live this principle and what are some ways we fall short?
- ▶ The axiom, "actions speak louder than words," aptly describes Jesus' message in today's Gospel. Righteous practice not one's title, or authority or name will be the means by which righteous life in the kingdom will be judged. If you were to be charged with living a righteous life, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What is that evidence?
- ▶ In what way does this Gospel invite us to be better disciples?

Catechist invites participants to reflect on the following question in the group or in their journal.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

*THE PRAYER,
O LORD MY GOD*

(By Saint Anselm.)

*O Lord my God.
Teach my heart this day
where and how to find you.*

*You have made me and re-made me,
and you have bestowed on me
all the good things I possess,
and still I do not know you.
I have not yet done
that for which I was made.*

*Teach me to seek you,
for I cannot seek you
unless you teach me,
or find you
unless you show yourself to me.*

*Let me seek you in my desire;
let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you;
let me love you when I find you.*

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- *How tuned in are you/we to the righteous actions of people in the secular world and see those actions as the hand of God working in and through such people? Do you have more of a tendency to see God working only within the confines of Church structures or do you see God working even through the non-believer? What does this situation teach us about God's relationship with all human beings in the world?*

Several years ago a lady was upset because she could not participate in an expected Church activity in which she was involved. She apologized profusely saying that she was a single mother who needed to spend as much time with her child as she could and that she was committed to her own personal outreach in the civic world. Her commitment of service was to volunteer one hour a week in a spousal abuse center as she had a vested interest in helping abuse victims. The only time the Church group met was during the time she was committed to this secular group. The Church facilitator very wisely told her she was doing what the Lord wanted her to do—her actions were indeed speaking louder than her words.

“Sometimes we think that things have to be generated from within the church for them to be Christian or holy. We fail to see that even secular efforts to offer compassion are “rewarded” by God. Today’s gospel reminds us that we are to accept all acts of kindness from “outsiders”; that they are, in essence, ‘with us’ “(Birmingham).

It is common to experience more hurt and betrayal at the hands of insiders than we do at the hands of outsiders. Such hurt and betrayal is poignantly painful. We think that Christians are immune from engaging in such hurtful behavior. Jesus teaches us that no one is immune from the poison of sin or from becoming outsiders by our actions.

The most hurtful experiences in service of the Gospel occur when “good Christians” gossip, bear false witness and malign other people in the community. I can remember a time when I was terribly hurt by such gossip. A woman in another parish many years ago went to the pastor to complain that I was not spiritual enough because I did not participate in her prayer group. I was furious to have been judged so harshly. This woman did not know me nor did she know my heart. How could she make such a judgment? Looking back on the situation I should thank her because the situation served as a catalyst for me to enter into deep and ongoing discourse with the God who knows me best and loves me most. I asked God if there was truth in her assertion. As a result I was led into an intimate communion with God that has driven my prayer life ever since.

This gospel speaks to me on another level. Someone close to me has an incredibly, close personal relationship with God. I do not understand it but it is very real—his communion with God is palpable. It is certainly not the path I would have chosen for this person. Knowing his life, I can thoroughly understand why this is the path God chose for him. In some ways his spiritual journey saved his life. Yet, perhaps as a result of my Catholic

roots his path is certainly not the path I would have chosen for him. In spite of appearances to the contrary, the wisdom of this man is something to behold and at which to marvel. My natural inclination is to mistrust the truth I see within him. Jesus speaks to me from this Gospel proclamation just as he spoke to John and tells me that if this young man is not against him, he is with him. Indeed he is with Jesus.

Today's gospel reminds me that God's actions do not always follow the course we/I assume they will follow. God can and will choose whomever God wishes and in any way he chooses to manifest love to his children. I had better get out of the way and let God be God.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Numbers 11: 25-29 | James 5: 1-6 | Mark 9: 38-43, 45, 47-48

Holy Orders

Prayer

Holy Spirit

Catholic Social Teaching

Saints

Sacraments

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

HOLY ORDERS

The reading from Numbers relates the story of Moses who appointed seventy elders to lead the people. God has always provided holy leadership for his people and continues to do so today. Jesus challenges his disciples' desire for power and control. He teaches them about what it means to be in leadership. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on the ministerial priesthood and what the Church teaches about Holy Orders.

PRAYER

Jesus teaches that anyone who heals or performs mighty works in Jesus' name is for him—not against him. They are obviously people of prayer and have accepted Christ in his fullness. Such belief is rooted in intimate relationship with God—that relationship is nurtured through prayer. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus teaches that anyone who heals or performs mighty works in Jesus' name is for him—not against him. Such ministry is exercised through the power of the Holy Spirit and that ministry continues in the Church today. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

James in today's second reading exhorts his community to be concerned about their eternal life—not wealth and possessions. He challenged the wealthy to share their God-given gifts with the less advantage. Such is the basis of social teaching. It is thus appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session today on what the Church teaches about CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

SAINTS

Jesus teaches his followers what it means to live righteously in the reign he came to establish. Those who live righteous lives according to St. Paul are called saints. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SAINTS.

SACRAMENTS

Jesus teaches that anyone who heals or performs mighty works in Jesus' name is for him—not against him. The power to perform such works continues in the Church today. The ministry of healing and reconciliation and the entire ministry of Christ is available to us in the sacraments of the Church. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Jesus teaches that anyone who heals or performs mighty works in Jesus' name is for him—not against him. The people in question in today's Gospel were offering Jesus' reconciling healing to those who were desperate to be freed from evil. That ministry continues today through the sacrament of reconciliation. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus teaches us the mind and heart of God and his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth as we await the kingdom yet to come. He reminds us that we are to examine our lives. Jesus reveals God's plan to us. He reveals God to all believers. That revelation continues in God's revealed, holy word. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II.

EUCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. This week we continue the series on the Mass. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.